
The Ecumenical Movement in 1920: (2) The Anglican Appeal to Unity

Odair Pedroso Mateus
Lecturer in ecumenical theology at the Ecumenical Institute Bossey (2004-2021)
Director of the WCC Commission on Faith and Order (2015-2022)
Deputy General Secretary of the World Council of Churches (2020-2022)

I. July 1920: A global gathering of Anglican bishops

End of June, early July 1920: 252 Anglican bishops from around the world converge to London. I travel the yellowish pages of the list of dioceses they represent: Zanzibar, Nagpur, Zululand, Adelaide, Argentina, Polynesia, Singapore, Bombay, Southern Brazil, Mombassa, Antigua, Tokyo. They are gathering for a conference called “Lambeth”, from the name of London residence house of the Archbishop of Canterbury, then Randal Davidson, whom they recognise as spiritual leader.

At the end of their meeting, early August, they launch a vibrant call to Christian unity which opens with these meaningful words: “we... bishops of the Holy Catholic Church in full communion with the Church of England... make this appeal to all Christian people”. In other words: The Church is One. Let us make visible its given unity by overcoming our visible divisions.

This is the sixth time they meet. The first was back in 1867. Accompanying the worldwide expansion of the British Empire, the Church of England was already a global communion of local churches living relatively apart and facing inevitable challenges related to identity, unity, governance. A global communion needed global instruments of communion.

The See of Canterbury, founded by Saint Augustine at the end of the 6th century, was one. The Lambeth conferences would soon be the second. Two others would come in more recent years: The Anglican Consultative Council, which includes lay, clergy and bishops representing all provinces; and the Primates Meeting or the annual gathering of the senior bishops of the Communion.

II. John Colenso or how controversial bishops may help to create communion...

Did the outstanding John William Colenso (1814-1883) know that controversial bishops may help to create instruments of communion? He ended up doing it.

Colenso, a young theologian whose wife Sarah Bunyon led him to discover the theology of the – at the time – unknown Frederick D. Maurice, was also a Mathematician who authored successful handbooks of algebra and arithmetic in his late 20s, which helped him to pay debts and study theology. But not only.

Elected bishop of Natal, South Africa, at the age of 39, Colenso would help to decolonise (if I can indulge in anachronism) the relation between gospel and culture. He co-authored a grammar of the Zulu language; published an English-Zulu dictionary; and translate the New Testament to Zulu. In a book of 1855, he made a theological case for a more sensitive approach to polygamy. Unlike many missionaries, he refrained from preaching on the eternal punishment of the ancestors of African Christians. He and his family never gave up advocacy for the victims of the colonial powers. Zulus used to call him *Sobantu*, father of the people. In Britain, he caused uproar by publishing noteworthy scholarly analyses of the Old Testament that challenged widely shared beliefs about the infallibility of the biblical text.

Colenso was (unsurprisingly) deposed by his colleagues in South Africa in 1863 on the grounds of modernist heresy. “How dangerous is the teaching of Bishop

Colenso”, wrote the Bishop of London to his colleague in Cape Town.

Colenso appealed to London. Janet Traill has explained the affair in a 2017 note for Church Times. A court decision in favour of Colenso led the provincial synod of the Canadian Church in 1865 to propose a worldwide bishops’ gathering to consider the matter in its implications for the whole Anglican Communion. The first Lambeth Conference convened September 24, 1867, on invitation of Archbishop Charles Thomas Longley, with 76 bishops in attendance instead of the expected 144: Apparently the English bishops did not seem very interested in Anglican conciliarity beyond the English borders.

The following Lambeth conferences would keep the unity of the Anglican Communion and Christian unity in general high on their agendas. When Archbishop Edward Benson issued the invitations to the 1888 conference, he informed his colleagues that the third out of six subjects for discussion would be “The Anglican Communion in relation to the Eastern Churches, to the Scandinavian and other Reformed Churches, to the Old Catholic Church, and others.”

II. The Lambeth Conferences and the Lambeth vision of Christian unity

By that time the American Episcopalians and the missionary bishops in Africa and in Asia were realising the urgency of settling the issue known as “home reunion”, in other words the separation between Anglican churches and Reformation churches. The 1888 Lambeth Conference agreed that dialogue with the so-called free churches with a view to home reunion would be based on a single principle containing four elements: a “quadrilateral”.

They were: “(a) The Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, as ‘containing all things necessary to salvation’, and as being the rule and ultimate standard of

faith”. (b) The Apostles’ Creed, as the baptismal symbol; and the Nicene Creed, as the sufficient statement of the Christian faith. (c) The two sacraments ordained by Christ himself - Baptism and the Supper of the Lord – ministered with unfailing use of Christ’s words of institution, and of elements ordained by him. (d) The historic episcopate, locally adapted in the methods of its administration to the varying needs of the nations and peoples called of God into the unity of his Church.”

III. The unity of humanity and the unity of the Church

What are the Anglican bishops saying about the unity of humanity in this summer of 1920, soon after a war that cost millions of lives, shook the foundations of European civilization and saw Christians killing Christians in the name of patriotism? What are they saying about the reconciliation between the Anglican Church and the Reformation churches in response to church union proposals and initiatives in India, Eastern Africa (think of the heat debate about the Kikuyu union plan) and in the US?

The Anglican bishops speak first of the unity of humanity. They relate the vision of God’s kingdom with nations united in righteousness and peace; they welcome the creation of the League of Nations, recognise what they call its “essential Christian basis”, and support Germany’s membership in it; they oppose injustice to indigenous or native races, including the opium traffic in China, and protest “colour prejudice”.

Then they turn to the unity of the Church, issuing no less than 22 resolutions on Anglican relations with other communions. The Anglican churches are called to cooperate with other churches “to restore the unity of the Church of Christ”; the Anglican provinces should prepare their members to take part “in the universal fellowship of the reunited Church”.

The bishops welcome advancing relations with the Orthodox churches. They recommend that councils

representing all Christian communions should be formed, “especially for practical purposes”. They have heard “with sympathetic and hopeful interest” of the upcoming meeting in Geneva in preparation for the World Conference on Faith and Order and pray “that its deliberations may tend towards the reunion of the Christian Church”.

The ecumenical vision that prefaces and bears this important impulse to ecumenical engagement is the Lambeth Appeal. The text, originally drafted during the meetings of the sub-committee on reunion with non-episcopal churches, was amended several times. Charlotte Methuen, the Lambeth Appeal archaeologist, has dedicated at least four essays (two of them to be published this year) and two videos available on YouTube to the making of the Appeal and its ecumenical significance.

In the encyclical letter that traditionally accompanies their Lambeth recommendations, the bishops wrote about the Appeal that “it appeared to us that we could best fulfil the duty laid upon us at this present time by placing this ideal before all who love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity...”

IV. What the Lambeth Appeal appeals to

Let us look briefly at the Appeal’s content. We acknowledge all those who believe in our Lord Jesus Christ and have been baptized into the name of the Holy Trinity, they write, “as sharing with us membership in the Universal Church of Christ...” God wills fellowship, made in and through Christ. It is God’s purpose to manifest it in a united society, “holding one faith, having its own recognised officers, using God-given means of grace, and inspiring all its members to the worldwide service of the Kingdom of God”.

This united fellowship “is not visible in the world today”. The causes of division include “self-will, ambition, and lack of charity among Christians”. This is contrary to

God's will. We desire to confess, they go on to write, "our share in the guilt of thus crippling the Body of Christ and hindering the activity of his Spirit".

The vision which rises before us, they state, is that of a Church, genuinely Catholic, in whose visible unity "all the treasures of faith and order, bequeathed as a heritage by the past to the present, shall be possessed in common". Within this unity, "Christian Communion now separated from one another would retain much that has long been distinctive in their methods of worship and service".

This visible unity involves – and here the bishops reformulate the 1888 Quadrilateral - "the wholehearted acceptance" of Holy Scriptures "as the record of god's revelation of himself to man, and as being the rule and ultimate standard of faith"; of the Nicene "as the sufficient statement of the Christian faith" and/or the Apostles' Creed "as the baptismal confession of belief"; of the "divinely instituted sacraments" of baptism and Holy Communion "as expressing for all the corporate life of the whole fellowship in and with Christ"; and of "a ministry acknowledged by every part of the Church as possessing not only the inward call of the Spirit, but also the Commission of Christ and the authority of the whole body".

While the bishops believe that this ministry is the episcopate exercised everywhere "in a representative and constitutional manner", they "thankfully acknowledge" that the ministries of the non-episcopal churches "have been manifestly blessed and owned by the Holy Spirit as effective means of grace".

V. Bishop George Bell and the Lambeth Appeal

A witness of the many discussions that led to the final text of the Appeal, the chaplain of Archbishop Davidson was also the secretary of the conference. His name may be familiar to you: George K. A. Bell (1883-1958).

Bell was drawn into the ecumenical movement during his student days at Wells College by no other than Tissington Tatlow, the secretary of the Student Christian Movement who a few years later, by securing the participation of the Anglican Church in the Edinburgh 1910 Missionary Conference, would help Edinburgh 1910 to become a seminal event in the modern ecumenical movement, the womb of the Movement for a World Conference on Faith and Order.

Bell's first-hand account of Lambeth 1920 and the Appeal was published ten years ago in an edition whose exhaustive notes, again by Charlotte Methuen, make it understandable even to impenitent dissenters.

In the years after Lambeth 1920, Bishop Bell of Chichester would succeed Archbishop Nathan Söderblom in the leadership of the Movement on Life and Work; rightly support Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Confessing Church during the *Kirchenkampf* (something Arthur Headlam's Faith and Order wouldn't do!); and be the Moderator of the World Council of Churches' Central Committee 1948 to 1954.

VI. The Lambeth Appeal and the ecumenical movement in 1920

The August 1920 Lambeth Appeal reminds in more than one way the January 1920 Encyclical of the Patriarchate of Constantinople "Unto the Churches of Christ Everywhere". Both texts are marked by humility, generosity, and receptiveness. Both texts speak of unity in terms of fellowship or *koinonia*, an imperfect communion in search of visible perfection. Both texts feel responsible for ecclesial life beyond the canonical borders they represent.

August 8, 1920. No less than fifteen bishops who have attended the Conference and contributed to the writing of the Lambeth Appeal – including Vedanayakam Samuel Azariah, Charles Gore, E. Palmer and Charles Brent – are now packing for Geneva where, within a couple of

days they will join the Orthodox Metropolitan Germanos of Seleukia - the main drafter of the Encyclical of Constantinople – for the preparatory meeting of the World Conference on Faith and Order.

But this is another story...

[The author dedicates this text to Canon John Gibaut with much gratitude]